Fowl
Feathered
Review
No. 175

LUNCH SPECIAL

(10:30 am to 3:00 pm) No Lunch on Holidays
All Served with Roast Pork Fried Rice & Pork Egg Roll
$1.25 Extra for Wonton or Egg Drop Soup

PORK

L32. Roast Pork Egg Foo Young
L33. Sweet & Sour Pork
L34. Roast Pork w. Mixed Vegetables
L35. Strip Pork w. Garlic Sauce
L36. Roast Pork Lo Mein
L37. Roast Pork w. Broccoli
L38. Roast Pork w. Chinese Vegetable
L39. Roast Pork w. Mushrooms
L40. Pork Chop Suey

Chicken Lo Mein
Chicken w. Chinese Vegetable
L13. Szechuan Chicken
L14. Foo Young
L15. Cashew Nuts
L16. Almond
L17.
L18. Kung Pao
Chicken Teriyaki w. Mixed Vegetable

L41. w. Snow Peas
Ribs

L43.

L49. Vegetables
L50.
L51.
L52.

VEGETABLES

L53. Vegetables
L54. Buddha's Delight
(Bean curd, gluten, mushroom)
L55. Mix Vegetables in Teriyaki Sauce
L56. Sauteed Broccoli
L57. Broccoli w. Garlic Sauce
L58. Vegetables Lo Mein
L59. Vegetables Egg Foo Young

Hunan
Hot & Spicy
Beef w. Mixed Vegetables
L25. Beef w. Black Bean Sauce
L26. Beef w. Mushrooms
L27. Beef w. Bean Curd (Tofu)
L28. Beef Lo Mein
L29. Beef Chop Suey
L30. Beef w. Chinese Vegetables
L31. Beef Teriyaki w. Mixed Vegetable

Means Hot and Spicy Dishes
Spices to Any Dish Can Be Adjusted

Issue № 175: Hear Ye! The Ballad of Grimaldi, First of the Whitefaces.

Fowl Feathered Review is a quarterly, a disordered artifact of the human impulse to categorize and consume the ephemeral. Produced by the Springwound Mammoth Pancake Coalition—an entity distinct from its waffle-centric counterpart—it is birthed under the Fowlpox Press imprint. Virgil Kay, its editor, presides over this enterprise from a paper canoe adrift on the Passagassawakeag, a river of dubious depth and even more dubious inhabitants. Surrounded by featherheads and their aquatic card games, Kay's reign is absolute, his word the final arbiter in the transformation of boastful souls into doormats. Layout and visual conceits are the province of Cookie Granola, while melodrama and histrionics fall under the purview of Childe Harold. Silent Bill, in his characteristically taciturn manner, provides necessary pauses. The review's structural integrity, or lack thereof, is the domain of Unkie Bob, whose talents extend to the mitigation of typographical errors and the prevention of electrical conflagrations. Everett Enótita serves as Kay's indispensable amanuensis, and the Ecum Secum Literary Brain Trust, in a gesture of dubious beneficence, offers nominal financial support. Printed upon the verdant expanse of Bald Porcupine Island, and laced with the enigmatic Kraa, a bioengineered culinary enigma, the Fowl Feathered Review remains a testament to human ingenuity, or perhaps merely a symptom of cultural decline. ISSN: 1929-7238.

"I am an observer of life, a non-participant who takes no sides. I am in the regimented society, but not of it."

--Moondog, The Viking of 6th Avenue

Return Policy:
If this magazine does not meet your expectations,
please return it to us in its original condition
for a full refund, minus the cost of enlightenment.

Submissions

Fowlpox Press: A Submission Guide for the Determined (or Deluded) To the Aspiring Artist (or Sandwich Enthusiast):

1. **Craft** (or **Culinary Construct**): 2-227 poems, a numerical range that hints at both ambition and a troubling lack of self-editing, may find their way to our digital doorstep (fowlpoxpress@mail2poet.com). Alternatively, for the visually inclined, paintings numbered 2-953 (a prolific career, or perhaps a basement overflowing with forgotten canvases?) are welcome. We are also, inexplicably, open to submissions of twelve-inch sandwiches.
2. **The Gatekeeper:** Address your offerings to Virgil Kay, Editor. In posession of remarkably discerning taste, or so he believes, Virgil is a rooster of some renown, a creature of instinct and inexplicable confidence. His title, “China Wok Habitue,” suggests a broader palate than one might expect from a bird, though it’s more likely a testament to the local takeout joint’s generous portions. (**Please note:** Include a bio, a desperate plea for recognition that will likely join the unread masses in the digital purgatory of our slush pile.)
3. **Format:** Poems, those valiant attempts at capturing the human experience in meter and rhyme, should be attached in a Word document or PDF. Paintings, windows into your soul (or a weekend spent with Bob Ross reruns), must be submitted in JPEG, TIFF, or a format our aging technology can comprehend. Jokes, if they exist, should be delivered in MP3 format. We are, alas, not equipped to handle the nuanced art of the live performance. Sandwiches, a curious offering in the realm of artistic expression, require clear plastic wrapping and a small packet of Kewpie Mayonnaise. (**Pro-tip:** The Kewpie packaging is, undeniably, a work of art in its own right, and we encourage you to admire it before consumption.)
4. **The Cycle Continues:** We exist in a perpetual state of acceptance and rejection. A Sisyphean task, some might say. We receive submissions 365 days a year, a testament to the relentless hope, or perhaps blissful ignorance, of aspiring artists. However, with a heavy heart (and a full crop), we must inform you that rejections also occur 365 days a year.
5. **The Sandwiches:** Ah, the sandwiches. These, unlike your artistic endeavors, find a permanent home within our editorial sanctum. Virgil, in his infinite wisdom, has determined that a diet rich in carbohydrates is essential for maintaining his regal demeanor.
6. **Leap Year Follies:** Leap years, those extra days gifted by the whims of the calendar, offer no reprieve. Aspiring poets, it seems, are undeterred by such temporal anomalies. You are, however, cordially invited to "take a flying leap" during these additional 24 hours.

Please proceed with caution. Artistic aspirations are a delicate dance, and the path to publication is littered with the fallen hopes of countless dreamers. But hey, maybe your sandwich is killer. Just remember, Kewpie or bust.

Fowl Feathered Review | Poets & Writers (pw.org)

"Non ignora mali, miseris succurrere disco."

— Virgil, The Aeneid

The Clown of Djenné

By Babacar Gueye

Adobe breathes, a city's skin,
two thousand years etched in clay.
No flush, no modern hum,
just the slow pulse of the Bani,
canoes like slivers of night,
nets cast where time forgets its name.

A carved serpent, a clown's initiation,
laughter's currency, traded jokes,
Tabacily's eyes, a teacher's gaze,
the Woloso dance, a release,
a jester's truth in a stratified world.

Bourgeois, skin of leather, eyes of blue,
a pony-tailed jester in indigo,
a Winnie-the-Pooh bag, a blue foam crown,
Harvard's echo in a mud-brick maze.

"How is your snake today?"
"Have you washed this morning?"
Pleasantries, a deeper current,
than our polished Western lies.

He stirs the pot, this outsider clown,
a dam's shadow, a highway's scar,
griots' praise, a king's embrace,
a Tankara staff, a fool's wisdom.

To be Woloso, to be free,
to speak the truth, naked and bold,
in a city where laughter is law,
and the past whispers from every wall.

Chokov, the Clown Who Found His Grin Underground

By Avgust Vasiliy Anatoli Ippolit Sokoloff

Chokov, a molder of clown shoes (an occupation whose inherent absurdity was a constant, if unspoken, source of philosophical inquiry for him), bore the crimson badge of his profession upon his nose. Its precise vermillion, a subject of endless nocturnal debate amongst his fellow laborers in the echoing, rubber-scented cathedral of the factory, felt to Chokov less like a mark of mirth and more like a perpetual, slightly damp question mark regarding the very nature of joy. He pressed the yielding rubber into the unyielding steel, each squeeze a small, Sisyphean act against the encroaching tide of existential goo. Trim, stack, sigh – the factory's percussive symphony of industry was, to his ears, increasingly underscored by a minor key of profound, if inarticulable, longing.

His next station: the mimeograph. This metallic behemoth, this tireless disseminator of state-mandated cheer, churned out its joyless pronouncements at a relentless pace. To Chokov, it seemed less a machine and more a sentient, albeit deeply melancholic, entity, forever doomed to reproduce the very pabulum that stifled genuine laughter. Upon the adjacent desk, amidst the mundane trinity of stapler, paper, and the inexplicably present Mir map, Chokov felt a sudden, sharp pang of temps perdu, a fleeting echo of a forgotten carousel and the faint, tinny strains of a melody he could almost, but not quite, grasp.

He snatched the map with a suddenness that belied the quiet desperation simmering beneath his painted smile. The stapler's decisive snick seemed to Chokov not merely the termination of a pamphlet's existence, but a tiny, metallic echo of the grand, inevitable silence that awaited all things. As he plummeted down the manhole, the weight of the cover – a tangible symbol, he mused, of the oppressive weight of the world – seemed to press upon him not just physically, but metaphysically.

A fleeting olfactory hallucination – the ghost of sawdust and applause clinging to a spectral mustache – whispered of a past where laughter felt less like a duty and more like a spontaneous eruption of the soul. The subterranean darkness hummed not just with the echoes of unseen audiences, but with the faint susurrus of forgotten dreams. The monocled sewer rat's gaze held not just disdain, but a weary knowing, a shared understanding of the futility of all earthly endeavor. The smell of rubber, once merely an occupational hazard, now carried the weight of unspoken sorrow, the taste of tears never allowed to fall.

Vitali Lazarenko, balancing spoons and Pravda with an air of profound intellectual weariness, observed the newcomer. "Another seeker," he murmured, his voice a low rumble, "drawn to the subterranean echo chamber of our shared absurdity. Do you, too, find the surface world... insufficiently ironic?" Boris Viatkin, contemplating the smuggling potential of clown shoes, sighed. "Literature," he mused, more to himself than anyone else, "the weight of words, the burden of meaning... can even oversized footwear truly bear such a load?" The mimeograph, a low thrumming emanating from its metallic core, seemed to emit a silent lament: "To endlessly reproduce the hollow pronouncements of joy... is this not the ultimate alienation? To be a vessel of mirth, yet know only the cold, metallic truth of repetition..."

Chokov's pirouette ended in a flurry of ideological confetti. As he bowed, tripping over his own vast feet, he muttered, "Is not all striving, ultimately, a clumsy stumble towards an unknowable void?" Landing amidst the elephantine vitamins, he felt a kinship with these oversized pills, each promising a vitality that perhaps, in this subterranean realm, was forever out of reach. The rubber chicken's honk, far from being a jest, now sounded to Chokov like a poignant cry into the echoing darkness.

First, the shattered ink bottle painted Chokov's face not just with blue, but with a fleeting mask of melancholy. "Each vibrant hue," he sighed, "a temporary distraction from the monochrome reality that awaits." His unicycle journey ended in a red-nosed imprint upon the wall, a testament, he felt, not to comedic ineptitude, but to the futility of trying to maintain balance in an inherently unbalanced world. Finally, immersed in the pickled herring, he looked up with a profound sadness. "Even in the briniest depths," he

murmured, “one cannot escape the pervasive tang of... disappointment.” Yet, despite these pronouncements, a flicker of something akin to amusement danced in the corners of his painted eyes.

The mimeograph whirred, its metallic voice a low, mournful drone. “The revolution of laughter... is it not merely another cycle? Another set of pronouncements, however joyous, destined for the dustbin of history?” Yet, even as it printed these somber thoughts onto the burgeoning issues of Mir, a faint, almost imperceptible giggle seemed to emanate from its inner workings. The crimson stain spread across the page, a poignant symbol of the ephemeral nature of even the most vibrant emotions.

A chorus of unseen clowns laughed, their joy tinged with a spectral echo of past sorrows. Above ground, the woman queuing for bread felt a sudden urge to giggle, a fleeting rebellion against the grayness, yet a shadow of doubt lingered – could such fleeting joy truly conquer the pervasive melancholy? The air in Leningrad shimmered, a fragile possibility hanging in the balance. “Is not all hope,” Chokov mused from his subterranean vantage, “merely a beautifully painted balloon, destined to eventually... deflate?” He watched the world change, a phantom trailing... a string of bunting that seemed to droop with existential weariness, a rain of confetti that felt like the scattered remnants of broken dreams, a grin returned from the depths, yet tinged with the faintest hint of... resignation.

The city bloomed with red noses and uncontainable giggles, yet beneath the surface of this newfound joy, a quiet question lingered. Could a pratfall and a pun truly unseat the profound absurdity of existence? As the world became a circus, Chokov, the clown who rewrote the script, couldn’t help but wonder if even the most joyful narratives were ultimately just... another story.

(Fin. The curtain falls with a sigh. The rubber chicken offers a bow of profound, if rubbery, resignation.)

Theod. Reimers
Hamburg
Reeperbahn 61.

Il Bloom Statico: Una Farsa Grottesca in Tre Atti Di Enzo Stravaganza (The Static Bloom: A Grotesque Farce in Three Acts by Enzo Stravaganza

Part 1: The Fading Negative (Or Chocko's Descent into the Clowning Abyss, *Accelerando*, featuring the psychoanalysis of Percy Parrot)

hocko's office, a testament to the agonizingly slow demise of everything *delizioso* – a veritable *porcile* of stale Arabica, Gauloises butts, and the lingering ghost of vanished joy. The desk, a battleground etched with the scars of countless ink-blot skirmishes and the relentless ticking of *il tempo*, groaned under the weight of unspoken anxieties. A manila envelope – *mamma mia*, its very beige-ness screamed of impending bureaucratic doom! – materialized like a summons from the tax authorities, overflowing with clownish pronouncements scrawled on greasy butcher paper, the smeared greasepaint resembling the early stages of a particularly aggressive mold. He, the unfortunate Chocko, balanced this manuscript of burgeoning madness upon a rubber chicken (a Kaufhof impulse buy, a siren song of *chincaglieria*). He attempted to decipher the clown-philosophy, each word a dry, tasteless *tarallo* crumbling in his mental palate. Perched atop a precarious stack of back issues of "Clown Monthly," Percy Parrot, resplendent in a shocking pink fright wig, observed the scene with an unnervingly intelligent gaze. He punctuated his observations with the delicate, yet somehow forceful, expulsion of pickled prune pits, each landing with a soft *plink* on a nearby lampshade.

"Observe, Chocko," Percy began, his voice a surprisingly deep baritone, each word resonating with a profound understanding of the human condition, "the chicken, a symbol of the absurd, the fleeting nature of joy grasped too tightly. Its revolt, sending your manuscript aloft, mirrors your own subconscious desire to escape the suffocating weight of expectation. The *volo* of lunacy you describe is not external, my dear fellow, but a projection of your own burgeoning self, yearning to break free from the confines of the 'gustoso' you so mourn." *Plink.* A prune pit landed perilously close to Chocko's ear.

Chocko, meanwhile, stooped to retrieve the scattered pages, a movement akin to a Renaissance master contemplating a dropped meatball, and *felt* the manuscript *vibrating* with an unseen energy. *Incredibile!* Utterly, beautifully *incredibile!*

Magic-realist laughter – a sound capable of curdling the finest Chianti – seeped through the shutters, taunting him, daring him to discover *gioia* in the humdrum. Chocko, balancing on tiptoe like a heron contemplating a particularly enticing minnow, peered out. A single red glove, *rosso passione*, impossibly vibrant against the muted tones of the office, lay on the carpet, a sartorial anomaly of such magnitude as to suggest the imminent arrival of the fashion police. He reached for it, but the glove recoiled as if imbued with a life of its own, like a pampered lapdog refusing affection. He lunged, a *commedia dell'arte* of pure clumsiness, tripped over a forgotten coffee cup (a vessel brimming with lukewarm *espresso*, the lifeblood of his stagnant existence), and collided with the wall, leaving a smear of cream-white paint, a perfect clown's tear – a *trompe l'oeil* of sorrow worthy of a Zavattini screenplay. That chicken! Always a catalyst for chaos!

"The red glove," Percy interjected, meticulously polishing his beak with a clawed foot, "represents the eruption of the passionate self, the *eros* suppressed by the 'fading negative' of your current existence. Its refusal to be grasped signifies your own fear of embracing this vibrant aspect of your being. The clown's tear on the wall? A manifestation of the sorrow inherent in this repression, a primal scream rendered in pigment." *Plink, plink.* Two prune pits landed in the coffee cup.

His interior monologue, a veritable *sinfonia* of anxiety, dissected each trivial event with the meticulous precision of a *chirurgo*. The cold slickness of the paint, the *bum-bum* of his heart (a *tic-tac* of approaching disaster), the phantom aroma of popcorn – a scent as evocative of childhood innocence as a Nonna's embrace, yet now tainted with the bitterness of *amarezza*. Mona Chrome, she of the gaze as frigid as *sorbetto al limone* and a vocabulary as meticulously pruned as a topiary garden, discovered him kneeling amidst the detritus, a tableau of tragicomic failure. "You've transgressed the fourth rule once more," she declared, her voice dripping with the saccharine sweetness of artificial

sweetener. The fourth rule, naturally, remained an enigma, an unwritten law whispered only to the truly damned.

That night, the rain-slicked alleyways mirrored the beautiful pandemonium of his inner world. He, Chocko, juggled discarded tin cans – a futile attempt to pacify his tormented spirit, much like a politician promising world peace. One can, resonating with a strange, operatic quality, sang a brief, metallic aria as it ascended, only to detonate upon impact, scattering phosphorescent rainwater like a Pollock painting fueled by cheap grappa. Ozone, that fickle temptress, stung his lungs. And then, *ecco lei!* There, partially obscured by the rising steam, a figure, slender, as enigmatic as Monica Vitti in a fog-laden piazza. A painted tear, mirroring his own, traced a path down the rain-streaked glass, mocking his pathetic attempts at solace. She winked, vanished, leaving only the echo of her sigh – a sigh as heavy with unspoken longing as a gondola laden with lovesick serenaders. That chicken! He's clearly an agent of chaos!

"The juggling of tin cans," Percy mused, preening a particularly vibrant feather in his fright wig, "represents your attempt to find order in chaos, a futile dance against the inherent absurdity of existence. The singing can, its explosive finale, symbolizes the fleeting nature of perceived harmony. And the mysterious woman with the painted tear? Your anima, Chocko, the feminine aspect of your psyche, glimpsed in the murky depths of your subconscious, yearning for recognition." *Plink.* A prune pit landed squarely on the rubber chicken's beak.

Suddenly, the alley erupts! From a seemingly ordinary Vespa, no fewer than *dodici* clowns spill forth, brandishing seltzer bottles and rubber chickens. The leader, a portly fellow with a magnificent handlebar mustache and a suspiciously perfect toupee, points a gloved finger at Chocko. "He has violated the fourth rule!" he bellowed, his voice thick with the fiery passion of a Neapolitan opera singer. A clown car, cleverly disguised as a *gelato* truck, screeches to a halt. Out pours a squadron of clown firefighters, armed with comically small hoses and outrageously large helmets, spraying everything with a blizzard of confetti. Che macello!

"The sudden eruption of clowns," Percy squawked, hopping excitedly on his perch, "is the external manifestation of your internal turmoil reaching a critical mass! The violation of the 'fourth rule' – that unspoken boundary you consistently transgress – has unleashed the chaotic forces of your id! Embrace the *macello*, Chocko! It is the sound of your true self breaking free!" *Plink, plink, plink.* A rapid-fire succession of prune pits rained down on Chocko.

Part 11: The Bleeding Palette (Beebee's Atelier of Ephemeral Delights, *Andante*, with further pronouncements from Percy Parrot)

Beebee's studio – a liminal space suspended between the damp embrace of subterranean tunnels and the sun-drenched lunacy of rooftop ruins. The walls, like a timeworn fresco ravaged by dampness, wept faint hues, colors recalling themselves in hesitant, artistic tremors. Here, in this sanctuary of creative ambiguity, she, Beebee, instructed Chocko in the Art of Visible Absence – a pursuit as contradictory as a silent opera. He attempted to convey *apprezzamento* (a feeling as unfamiliar to him as a quiet gondola ride in August): He arranged three tear-shaped balloons in a perfect equilateral triangle, declared, with the solemnity of a bishop blessing a plate of lasagna, "For your tutelage," and released them heavenward. They popped in quick succession – *pffft, bang, splat* – a pathetic symphony of deflation, showering salty droplets onto the cracked concrete, a perfect allegory for his own rapidly diminishing sense of self-worth. He bowed, losing his footing on the slick residue, a clumsy curtsy before the altar of artistic inadequacy. That chicken! Soon to be a culinary experiment!

A telephone, balanced precariously on a fractured stand, cackled and groaned, its receiver murmuring fragmented circus melodies, a dissonant *notturno* of the damned. He pressed it to his ear – an act as ill-advised as putting pineapple on a perfectly good pizza.

"Seek the un-found, articulate the un-spoken," the voice rasped, a riddle wrapped in a mystery, marinated in static. The mirror opposite rippled, a distorted funhouse reflection of his already skewed reality. His reflection sported crimson greasepaint around the eyes, a mask of forced gaiety, and a grin that threatened to fracture his visage. Behind him, shadows detached themselves from the walls, enacting an incomprehensible *pantomima*, a dark and twisted commentary on his own farcical existence.

"The deflating balloons, Chocko," Percy observed, nibbling thoughtfully on a prune, "represent the ephemeral nature of your attempts at gratitude. The 'Art of Visible Absence' that Beebee teaches is a reflection of your own tendency to obscure your true self. The cackling telephone and distorted reflection? The cacophony of your subconscious and the fractured image of your own identity." *Plink.* A prune pit landed in Beebee's paint palette, leaving a small purple stain.

He drafted an editorial notice for *The Capricious Chronicle*: "We celebrate absence, the poetry of the unseen" – a pretentious pronouncement as empty as a politician's promises after election day. He typed, backspaced, typed again, his fingers performing a nervous *fricassea* on the keyboard. Mona, positioned across the hall like a disapproving *matriarca*, scrutinized his every keystroke. She arched a single, eloquent eyebrow – a silent pronouncement of utter disbelief. "You intend to liquidate half the staff to finance this *sciocchezza*?" she inquired, her voice as parched as day-old bread. He offered a smile, a grotesque imitation of human warmth, "I am cultivating seeds in barren soil," a statement so utterly devoid of self-awareness it approached the profound.

A telegram, that relic of a bygone era, arrived like a spectral messenger: Silas Grimbly awaits. Chocko, consumed by apprehension, shoved the note into his pocket and, *inevitably*, stumbled over the doorstep, sending a tray of teacups into a crystalline cascade, a percussive concerto of shattered porcelain. He laughed – a forced, hollow sound that echoed the emptiness within him – then, with a sudden surge of glorious *follia*, clapped a teacup lid onto his head like a makeshift helmet, a ludicrous gesture that was, in its own way, profoundly moving. He realized, with a jolt of terrifying clarity,

that he meant it. He meant *ogni singola cosa!* That chicken! He's destined for a slow braise with root vegetables!

"The telegram, Chocko," Percy announced, spreading his wings dramatically, "is the call to confront the silent language of your subconscious, represented by Silas. The shattered teacups and the helmet? The breaking of old patterns and the adoption of a new, albeit absurd, form of protection. You are shedding your former self, however clumsily." *Plink.* A prune pit landed on Mona's meticulously coiffed hair.

Suddenly, the studio door bursts open! More clowns! This time, they arrive in a clown ambulance, complete with a siren that warbles *Mamma Mia!* slightly off-key. They carry him out on a stretcher, completely covered in confetti, while a clown doctor examines him with an enormous stethoscope. "He is afflicted with a severe case of *la quarta regola*!" the doctor proclaims, his voice booming through the studio. Che delirio!

"The arrival of the clown ambulance, Chocko," Percy declared with theatrical flair, "signifies the full-blown emergence of your clown persona! The off-key *Mamma Mia!* underscores the beautiful imperfection of this transformation. You are being carried away, quite literally, by the forces of your own awakening!" *Plink, plink.* Two prune pits landed on the departing stretcher.

Part III: The Spectral Midway (Where Hope Goes to Die, Laughing, *Allegro con Brio*, Percy offers his final insights)

The seaside park, bleached by sun and salt, resembled a graveyard for forgotten amusements. Ferris wheels, skeletal giants against the azure canvas, stood like toothless grins, monuments to the transient joys of youth. Chocko discovered Silas near a shattered carousel mirror, a funhouse reflection of his fragmented psyche. The mime's hands, those instruments of silent expression, contorted into impossible shapes,

beckoning him closer, inviting him into a realm of unspoken truths. Without warning, Silas produced a ladder, its rungs stretching towards the infinite, a Jacob's Ladder leading to nowhere in particular. Chocko, propelled by an inexplicable *impeto*, ascended it, his feet brushing against the void. He mimed astonishment, a display of simulated emotion so convincing that a seagull, mistaking his performance for genuine distress, dropped half a sardine at his socked foot, a pathetic offering from the avian gods. He bowed, a gesture of ironic gratitude. That chicken! He's about to become a deeply philosophical soup!

A bouquet of wilting shadows, plucked from the garden of despair, drifted from Silas's pocket – petals of twilight and regret, their fragrance as melancholic as a lone *fisarmonica* on a deserted pier. Chocko caught one, inhaled its ethereal scent, and, in that instant, understood: absence possesses substance, a gravity that threatens to engulf you entirely. He turned, mirroring Silas's silent gestures, a broken curtsy, a cough of static, the language of the lost.

Memory fractured, a kaleidoscope of fleeting images: a carnival ticket consumed by flames in his palm, Mona's voice announcing "edition esaurito," a child's laughter dissolving into the sea breeze, a poignant reminder of all that had slipped away. The carousel's horses, frozen in mid-gallop, lurched in repetitive cycles, trapped on a malfunctioning film reel. Chocko wandered among them, each step a transition between presence and absence, reality and illusion, sanity and glorious madness.

Mona, materializing as if from the salty air, carried a tin of crackers, as bland as a politician's promises during a televised debate. She crouched beside him, offering one, a gesture of unexpected compassion, or perhaps, a calculated act of psychological manipulation. He nibbled, observed as her reflection shimmered, a distorted image in the fractured mirror, a reminder that even in the deepest shadows of the human heart, a flicker of hope persists, however fragile, however transient. He attempted a final bow, jerky, mechanical, a broken film reel looping endlessly, a fitting conclusion to this tragicomic *opera*. Static crackled through the air, applause or interference, the distinction was irrelevant.

Chocko, The Static Harlequin, remained suspended, a prisoner of his own magnificent creation. His face, painted white, cracked like a sun-baked terra cotta pot, his eyes, wide and vacant, gazed into the beautiful abyss. He grinned, a grotesque, terrifying, exquisite grin. And within that grin – absurd, solitary, unwavering – life held meaning, love held meaning, the beautiful terror of silence held meaning. Even in the face of utter meaninglessness, meaning endured, a truth both bizarre and profound. And from this precarious vantage point, Chocko could finally perceive his destiny, and embrace it with open arms. His time was drawing near, just as the chicken, his long-suffering foil, was about to be embraced by simmering water, destined to be his final, deeply symbolic meal.

"Observe, Chocko's ascent," Percy intoned, his gaze fixed on the figure atop the ladder, "a symbolic rise above the mundane, a rejection of earthly constraints. The wilting shadows represent the acceptance of loss, the understanding that even in decay, beauty can be found. The fractured memories and the malfunctioning carousel? The fragmented nature of identity and the repetitive cycles of existence. Mona's offering of the cracker? A fleeting moment of connection in the vast emptiness. And finally, that magnificent, terrifying grin? The embrace of the absurd, the ultimate triumph of the self in the face of meaninglessness. He has come into his own, Chocko has. He has found his truth in the beautiful madness." *Plink.* A single, final prune pit landed softly at the base of the ladder.

Suddenly, *the entire park erupts in a glorious cacophony of clownish pandemonium!* Dozens upon dozens of clown cars, disguised as everything from *cannoli* carts to miniature replicas of the Colosseum, careen wildly across the grounds. Clown firefighters engage in spirited water fights with oversized water pistols filled with fizzy lemonade, while clown doctors administer hilarious diagnoses with comically large thermometers. And at the very heart of this delightful chaos, Chocko, his grin wider and more radiant than ever, throws his arms wide in joyous surrender. That infernal chicken is now leading a brass band of miniature clowns on a parade through the rose garden!

LAUNDROMAT
OPEN
HYPER SPACE
JACKPOT

Suds Bucket Songs

By Morris Phelps

The spin cycle's low thrum, a constant undertow
in the dryer's steady hum of the Suds Bucket.
Then, a fractured melody bleeds
from the corner, the resurrected ghost
of a childhood galaxy.
Six notes, looping, tinny and triumphant,
a semi-digital echo of John Williams,
caught in a stuttering circuit.
R2-D2's clipped, electronic anxieties
punctuate the repetition,
a language of pure, beeping worry
over Luke's next impossible shot.

Each metallic thwack of the silver ball
against a faded plastic X-wing
calls forth a phantom flicker
of arcade light, the sticky joystick,
the breathless anticipation.

Leaving the stale detergent air,
the sudden cool damp of twilight.
The road home, usually a ribbon of asphalt,
now vibrates with a deeper pulse.
Not the mechanical churn, but a living one.

From the unseen edges of the wetlands,
a chorus rises, a thousand tiny throats
swelling with the ancient rhythm of spring.

The deep bass brrrp of the bullfrogs
intertwines with the higher, peeping chorus,
a layered symphony of amphibian yearning.

And the mind, that tireless weaver,
begins its subtle work.
The six-note loop, still faintly resonating,
finds its counterpart in the frog's insistent call.
R2's worried beeps morph
into the quick, staccato chirps
of smaller frogs hidden in the reeds.

The heroic arc of a pinball game,
the desperate mission to destroy the Death Star,
melts and reforms into the primal urgency
of the pond, the silent, moonlit drama
of survival and procreation.

The binary triumph, the digital heroism,
overlay the earthy, guttural pronouncements
of life emerging from the mud.
A strange, wistful harmony,
the ghost of a machine-made galaxy
finding its echo in the oldest music of the earth.
The mind, a conjurer of connections,
insisting on a pattern, a hidden score
in the disparate soundtracks of an evening.

Chocko The Clown Overshares

By Lake Mynatt

The absurdity machine hums louder,
a black hole spinning its silk threads–
baroque digressions of words drunk on themselves,
anti-punchlines that linger like smoke after fireworks,
deadpan stares sharp enough to curdle galaxies,
Groucho's ghost whispering jokes into an empty microphone,
thesauruses vomiting mid-sentence in technicolor splendor,
prog-jazz tangents spiraling off into the cosmos.

Here we are:
an autopsy performed by a clown with latex gloves three sizes too small,
dissecting silence as if it were a whoopee cushion punctured by philosophy.

1. The Psychiatric Lawnmower Incident Revisited

My limbs twitched–
not dance moves but glitches,
a marionette abandoned mid-performance
by some cruel puppeteer.
"See a psychiatrist," said the doctor.

Lucky me, my neighbor is one–
his forehead a fractal of buried childhoods,
each furrow an equation unsolved since Freud first scribbled dreams.
I stared at him for fifty-three minutes while he mowed his lawn
in hypnotic loops,
a spiral galaxy carved out of grass clippings.

Breakthrough?
He mistook me for a garden gnome
and tried to trim my eyebrows with hedge shears.
Now I look like someone who has seen eternity reflected in a cracked mirror.

Postscript: He billed me for “exposure therapy.”
I paid in existential dread and a coupon for the kiddie rides.

2. Google, My Algorithmic Oracle

In the dark glow of my screen,
I consulted the oracle of our age.
It informed me—with all the solemnity of a monocled undertaker—
that my symptoms ("persistent sense of impending mime")
pointed toward either generalized anxiety disorder
or early-stage werewolf.

My therapist’s notepad resembled a battlefield
where Scrabble tiles fought to the death.
She advised me to “unplug from the algorithm.”
I told her I had truly disengaged.
My phone corrected “disengaged” to “disemboweled”.
Now a gastroenterologist might call.

3. The Circus of What-Now?

“Face your fears,” said my shrink,
who charges by the hour but dispenses wisdom
in particles so fine they disappear before landing.
So I went to the circus and hugged a lion.

Its mane roared louder than its growl,

a ‘70s bassist lost in a solo that never ends.
The lion responded with the enthusiasm of a teetotaler
at a champagne fountain.

I left with a limp that syncopates perfectly in 5/4 time
and a phobia of lions who critique jazz albums.

N.B.: The lion sent me a letter calling me
an emotional dumpster-diver.
Framed it, naturally.

4. The Bill That Bit Back

Realizing my neighbor derived more therapeutic benefit
from my staring than I did,
I invoiced him:
“Existential Vigilance: $250/hr. Bulk discounts available
for crises of faith.”

He countered with a placebo labeled:
SELF-AWARENESS (Take 2, never call).
Turns out they were Skittles.
I swallowed them anyway.
My condition improved slightly;
now I crave rainbows in chronological order.

5. Mindfulness Went Wrong, Obviously

“Be present,” said the therapist.
So I watched my thoughts slink across my mind
like cats stalking invisible prey.
Mid-meditation, I noticed my clown nose was upside-down.

My face became a visual pun:
“The Descent of Man, Interpreted by Mime School Dropouts.”

She called it “progress.”
I called it structural failure.
Adhesive dignity dripping down my cheeks
like sweat under stage lights.

Coda: The Insurance Gag

Filed a claim for “humor-based palliative care.”
Denied. “Pre-existing condition: humanity.”
Appealed. Argued my clown license voids all claims
to biological normalcy.
Claim remains pending,
much like my grip on… well, everything.

Final Note: If laughter is the best medicine,
my HMO calls it experimental treatment.
Currently suing for in-network funny.
Think of it as a poem stretched thin over chaos,
every line break a punchline you didn’t see coming.

Sadko's River of Electric Stars

By Klavdia Svetka Mikhailova

In the days when the Volkhov's waters ran backwards to please the Tsar beneath the waves, and the birch trees whispered secrets to the moon, there lived a . His gusli sang not with horsehair strings, but with filaments stolen from the Northern Lights. He wandered, as all such men do, until the earth spat him onto the shores of a strange land—Springfield, Massachusetts, where concrete rivers roared louder than any sea.

The circus unfolded like a matryoshka doll cracked open by lightning. It took me 20 minutes to write out "matryoshka." First, the children marched, their shoes squeaking like mice beneath the hymn of a synthetic anthem. A girl crowned in rhinestones and diesel fumes waved to no one. Above her, the flag shuddered, its stripes twisting into the shape of a sturgeon's spine. Sadko watched from the shadows, fingers tracing the scar on his wrist where the Sea Tsar's bargain had once bled.

Clowns erupted in a cacophony of greasepaint and bad physics. One rode a unicycle through a fog of glitter, wheels screeching a tune Sadko recognized from his mother's funeral. Another hurled rubber chickens that morphed midair into crows, their feathers slick with motor oil. The audience laughed, not noticing the birds' eyes glowed like drowned coins.

"Play," hissed the gusli in its case, strings humming with the voltage of stolen substations. Sadko obeyed. His first chord split the basketball hoop's net into a thousand silvery eels. The second woke the bears hibernating beneath the interstate, their claws carving hymns into the asphalt.

The gymnasts came next—sinew and ambition coiled tight as watch springs. A boy launched himself from a springboard, hung suspended like a question mark, and shattered into a flock of sparrows. No one remarked on it. The trampoline breathed in time with Sadko's pulse, its surface rippling like the Black Sea in a storm.

“You owe me a soul,” whispered the Tsar through the concession stand’s deep-fryer vents.

"Yeah, about that," said Sadko. "Market price has kinda tanked since the whole Rasputin thing."
Sadko plucked a dissonant chord. A shadow peeled itself from the foam pit and slid into the rafters, wearing the face of the Circus Queen’s estranged father.

At intermission, babushkas hawked pirozhki stuffed with cloudberries and lithium batteries. Sadko traded his last ruble for a Coke that fizzled like the Caspian’s froth. The weightlifters’ grunts echoed the groans of Novgorod’s church bells, buried beneath six centuries of New England topsoil.

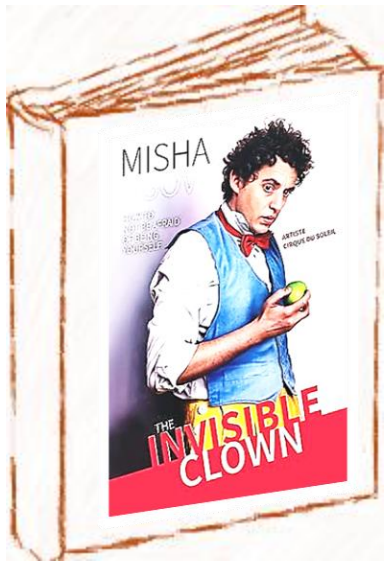
When the animals came—a mangy lion, two foxes with Bluetooth collars—Sadko’s gusli hissed. The beasts circled him, pupils reflecting the exact shade of his wife’s hair the day he left her. The domare cracked his whip, and the lion dissolved into a swarm of mayflies, each carrying a fragment of Sadko’s first kiss.
In the finale, they built a pyramid of flesh and desperation. Sadko climbed, his boots leaving frostbite blossoms on their shoulders. The gusli’s strings spat sparks that melted the stars painted on the gym ceiling. Below, the Tsar’s daughter—disguised as a cheerleader with a smartphone—clicked her tongue.

“Come home,” she said, not unkindly, as the pyramid collapsed into the Connecticut River.

By dawn, only traces remained: A half-eaten pretzel shaped like a gusli. A puddle of brine where the dunk tank had stood. The Circus Queen’s crown, now rusted and singing a lullaby in Old Church Slavonic.

And so Sadko walks still, past the Taco Bells and Orthodox steeples, his music tangled in the power lines. Some say the Tsar’s daughter follows, her high heels clicking like a metronome. Others insist it’s just the wind off I-91, carrying the scent of burnt sugar and unfinished tales.

Listen, when the Kalinka festival lights gutter out, and you'll hear it—the faint twang of a gusli string. A reminder: All circuses are rituals. All borders are seafloors. And every anthem, if played backwards, becomes a lullaby for drowned things.
Thus ends the tale, neither finished nor begun, for such is the way of stories that swim upstream.



The Enduring Jest: A Doctoral Dissertation (Slightly Soiled) on the Scholarly Lineage and Utterly Bonkers Manifestations of Clowning

(Written by Virgil Kay as a doctoral thesis for submission to The Grand Order of the Honk and the Hilarity Hauptbahnhof)

Abstract (Re-Fried and Served with Extra Szechuan): This... thing... we're still calling a dissertation (mostly to impress our poultry-loving friends) delves into the surprisingly long and winding (think a drunken chicken) history of clowning. We still maintain, with the unwavering conviction of a rooster who's just pecked at a particularly spicy General Tso's, that clowns are more than just painted faces and squeaky noses; they're... something else entirely. Prepare for a scholarly stumble from a barrel-dwelling philosopher with a light-based vendetta to fellas who weaponize joy with the precision of a seasoned wok chef. And yes, Diogenes is still here, now in a diaper and armed with a flashlight, because... well, just because.

Keywords (Seasoned with Extra MSG): Clowning (still serious business, just... sillier), Diogenes (still philosophical, still diapered, still blinding), Commedia dell'Arte (the original spicy Italian comedy), Vaudeville (the all-you-can-eat buffet of entertainment), Music Hall (where the jokes were as thick as the fog), Charlie Chaplin (the sweet and sour of silent cinema), Marx Brothers (the five-spice blend of anarchy), European Clowns (with a certain je ne sais quoi... and possibly better bread), Tatti (the silent spring roll of theatricality), Contemporary Clowning (now comes in unexpected flavors), Performance Art (sometimes best left in the takeout container), "Sunshine Screwball" (our secret family recipe for joyful chaos), Social Commentary (best served with a side of irony), Theatrical History (as remembered after a particularly large plate of Kung Pao).

Quote (Wisdom from the Wok): "Life, like a good stir-fry, is best when it's a little bit unpredictable, a little bit messy, and ultimately leaves you wanting more. Also, maybe add some sesame oil." - Virgil Kay, Editor-in-Chief, Fowl Feathered Review.

Chapter 1: The Philosophical Underpinnings of Wobbly Logic: Diogenes and the Dawn of Deliberate Daftness - The Barrel of Perpetual Bewilderment (Now Adjacent to a Faint Aroma of Takeout)

“Ah, Diogenes,” Virgil Kay sighs, adjusting his spectacles and trying to avoid shining his own penlight into his eyes while Diogenes’s beam sweeps the room. “A... character. Much like the mystery meat special at China Wok – you’re never quite sure what you’re getting, but it’s certainly... an experience. This ‘Cynic School’... more like a particularly stubborn fortune cookie refusing to open. Rejecting societal norms? Admirable, in a ‘refusing to eat your vegetables’ kind of way. Diogenes, living in his... well, his fermented grape juice repository... his actions... were they profound social critique or just the behavior of someone who’d spent a bit too long in a barrel? The flashlight... a modern upgrade to his lantern, I suppose. Still not helping him find that honest man. Maybe he should try the late-night crowd at China Wok. You see all sorts there. (Sloterdijk, 1987) Footnote seven... oh dear, he’s found it. Now he’s trying to read it with the flashlight. The dedication is... intense.”

(Sound: The gentle hum of the flashlight, the sloshing of liquid in the barrel, and the crinkling of a discarded takeout container.)

Chapter 2: From Medieval Jesters to Theatrical Mayhem: When Slapstick Met Shakespeare (Briefly) - The Motley Masquerade of Mild Malice (Interrupted by Infant Illumination)

"Hark!" Barty Bumble cries, trying to maintain his composure despite the intermittent blinding. "The jester! A vital... oof! ... part of courtly life! They could... aaaaah! ... speak truth to power! Though Diogenes here seems more interested in speaking truth to... my retinas. And the Commedia dell'Arte! Those glorious... ow! ... masked marvels! Their lazzi! Those bursts of... unexpected light! And the fou! The wise... hold still, you little... fool! ... who often knew more than..."

(Suddenly, Sluggo the Clown (in full surreal clown regalia, complete with improbable props) enters, wielding an assortment of pots and pans. He deftly uses them to block Diogenes's flashlight beams, creating a percussive, clangorous rhythm.)

Diogenes (in a surprisingly high-pitched voice): Sluggo, you're a great clown, but this bit has gone to pot.

(Sound: The chaotic clang of pots and pans battling a high-powered flashlight beam, interspersed with medieval lute music and startled bell jingles.)

Chapter 3: Continental Clowning: Accents and Absurdity Across the Pond - The Euro-Circus of Existential Ennui (and Baguettes, Now Slightly Singed)

(Eastern European Narrator): "The clown... his soul... is heavy... like dumpling... filled with... sadness. (Bakhtin, 1968) The light... it does not make... lighter."

(French Narrator): “Mais oui! The Whiteface! So elegant! So… blinded! (Bouissac, 1976) And the Auguste! A triumph of… illuminated incompetence! Regardez! He trips! He falls! Under the harsh glare of… le bébé philosophe!”

(Sluggo the Clown reappears, now using his pots to create a shadow puppet show on the Eastern European backdrop – a surprisingly accurate depiction of a dragon chasing a dumpling. He then offers the Whiteface clown a tiny, screaming fortune cookie.)

(Sound: Mournful accordion battling frantic tuba, the clanging of pots and pans, and the faint sound of a tiny teapot emitting a high-pitched scream.)

Chapter 4: The American and British Sideshows of the Soul: Vaudeville, Music Hall, and the Birth of Cinematic Silliness - The Transatlantic Triumph of the Trot and the Tirade (Under Intermittent Interrogation)

“Vaudeville! Music Hall!” Virgil exclaims, ducking. “A glorious… chaotic… blinding… mess! (Stott, 2009) Chaplin! The Little Tramp! A silent poem of… illuminated… pathos! (Robinson, 1988)”

(Sluggo the Clown provides a surprisingly effective (and loud) percussive soundtrack to Chaplin’s sped-up antics, using his pots to emphasize the pratfalls.)

“And the Marx Brothers!” Virgil continues, now using his baguette as a shield against the flashlight. “Anarchy! Pure, unadulterated… clangorous… anarchy! (Gehring, 2003)”

(Sluggo the Clown conducts the Marx Brothers’ montage with his pots, creating a bizarre and hilarious symphony of kitchenware.)

(Sound: Ragtime piano battling honking horns, all punctuated by clanging metal and Virgil Kay's increasingly exasperated sighs.)

Chapter 5: European Theatrical Clowning: Silence That Speaks Volumes (Mostly Gibberish, Now Under Intense and Clanging Scrutiny) - The Mime Mafia and Their Existential Hand Gestures (Accompanied by Diapered Illumination and Culinary Clatter)

(Projected note): "Tatti... Decroux... movement... amplified... by light... and... clank. (Feldenkrais, 1981) Invisible box... now... very visible... and... noisy. Meaning... still... like trying... to understand... menu... entirely in... emojis."
(Sluggo the Clown emphasizes Monsieur Silencio's struggle with the invisible box with a series of dramatic cymbal crashes using pot lids.)

(Sound: Heavy breathing into a microphone punctuated by the resonant clang of Sluggo's percussion and the faint whirring of Diogenes's flashlight.)

Chapter 6: "Sunshine Screwball": The Art of Being Earnestly Bonkers (Now Featuring a Diapered Disruptor and a Percussive Prophet of Positivity) - The Joyful Jamboree of Jaw-Droppingly Illogical Affection (Under Bright Lights and a Symphony of Spoons)

"'Sunshine Screwball'!" Virgil shouts over the din. "The pure... slightly concussive... joy! (Gordon, 2010) Barnaby's vacuum cleaner serenade... now with... added illumination and... rhythmic banging!"

(Sluggo the Clown joins Professor Positivity on the trampoline, his percussive leaps creating a chaotic, yet somehow uplifting, soundscape.)

(Sound: Wildly upbeat ukulele battling enthusiastic (and occasionally off-beat) percussion from Sluggo, punctuated by Diogenes's cooing and Virgil Kay's slightly manic laughter.)

Chapter 7: Clowning in the Modern Age: From Therapy to Terrifying Trends (Now with Existential Diaper Angst and Culinary Commentary) - The Clown Renaissance (and the Occasional Existential Dread, Now Illuminated and Accompanied by Kitchenware)

"Clowning today..." Virgil mutters, cracking open his fortune cookie. "...therapeutic... sometimes... unless... bright lights... and... loud noises... (Fry, 1992) Creepy clowns... still... unsettling... like finding a hair in your wonton soup."

(Sluggo the Clown attempts to soothe Diogenes with gentle, resonant tones played on a set of graduated mixing bowls, occasionally offering him a small whisk.)

(Sound: Gentle piano battling unsettling honks, all underscored by Sluggo's calming (or strangely unsettling) bowl music and Diogenes's contented gurgling.)

Conclusion: The Enduringly Absurd Quest for Meaning (and a Good Pie in the Face, Now Brightly Lit and Percussively Scored) - The Grand Finale of Flustered Finality (Featuring Philosophical Infants, Culinary Wisdom, and a Whole Lot of Clatter)
(A slightly greasy sign reads: "THE END... (And Maybe Time for Some Takeout?)")

(A glorious, deafening cacophony of off-key music, honks, applause, manic laughter, the clang and thud of Sluggo's percussion, Diogenes's happy shrieks, and the unmistakable "splat" of a pie hitting someone (possibly Virgil Kay) in the face, all captured in stark, unflattering light.)

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Sluggo the Clown, Professor Emeritus

SIGNATURE

Of Pulp and Pies

By Trombo Carablanca

The turbines of the Allied Paper Mill, a hulking brick edifice squatting along the industrial waterfront near Ohio Street in Buffalo, hummed a monotonous tune, a far cry from the celebratory oompah band Mabel had envisioned. Eighty years of pulping along the Buffalo River, and this was the best they could muster? A lukewarm vat of something vaguely resembling party dip and a banner that read "Happy Anniversary, You Old Pulpers!" Mabel, a woman whose no-nonsense demeanor could curdle the milk from the dairy farms south of the city, was not impressed. She'd taken matters into her own hands, scouring GigSalad during her lunch break, a Sahlen's hot dog tucked into a Costanzo's roll clutched in her left hand. That's when she found him: Chocko. His profile picture featured a disturbingly ageless face, smeared with makeup that looked both ancient and avant-garde. His bio read: "Chocko: Clown. Time Traveler. Cream Pie Aficionado. Will make your event an event." Mabel clicked "Book."

The afternoon of the anniversary, the mill was in full swing, the air thick with the smell of... well, pulped wood and the faint, lingering aroma of the Tonawanda Coke plant downriver. Suddenly, near the old loading docks where barges used to deliver logs, a section of the corrugated iron wall shimmered, then dissolved, revealing a cloud of dust and a contraption that defied description. It was a cart, seemingly cobbled together from spare parts salvaged from the defunct Bethlehem Steel plant and pulled by a surprisingly spry-looking goat. At the reins sat Chocko. A sticker on the side of the cart read, in faded block letters, "No Smoking in the Cart." Mabel, already reaching for the pack of Camels in her apron pocket, pointedly ignored it.

He didn't so much enter the room as manifest within it. He winked at Mabel, his painted smile somehow both welcoming and unsettling. "Mabel, my bloomers! You called for a clown, and a clown you shall receive! Chocko's the name. Been clowning since they were carving jokes on clay tablets." His voice was a bizarre amalgam of the late Stan Lipsey's

folksy drawl and the nasal whine of a disgruntled Elmwood Village resident complaining about parking.

Mabel, never one to mince words, raised an eyebrow. "I've seen more exciting entrances at a DMV grand opening," she said, her tone as flat as the surface of Lake Erie on a windless day. "Eighty years of pulping, Chocko. Eighty years. And I want to know who made the best cream pies for throwing. None of this 'squirting flower' nonsense."

Chocko hopped down from the cart, dusting off his ridiculously oversized shoes, which looked suspiciously like they'd been fashioned from old inner tubes. "Cream pies, you say? Ah, a woman of discerning taste! Follow me, my dear, and I shall take you on a journey through time, a veritable pie-oneer pilgrimage!" He gestured grandly at the goat-drawn cart. "This, my dear Mabel, is the Chrono-Cart. Holds more temporal paradoxes than you've had fish fries. And Gnorman here," he patted the goat, "is our pilot. He's got a nose for a good custard."

"Does it have a return policy?" Mabel asked, eyeing the cart. "I'd hate to get stuck in the Middle Ages with no GPS to get back to South Buffalo."

Before she could protest further, Chocko grabbed her hand, and they were in the cart. The mill vanished, replaced by a swirling vortex of colors and sounds, punctuated by snippets of Bloomberg Radio: "...and now a word from our sponsor, Chateau Pillow, the only pillow crafted with genuine alpaca fleece sourced directly from... (static)...analysts predict a slight uptick in the widget futures... (more static)...indulge in the cloud-like comfort of Chateau Pillow, available at fine retailers throughout the tri-state area..."

"First stop," Chocko announced, his voice echoing through the time warp, "Ancient Rome! Behold, Bromius, the Paterfamilias of pastry punishment!" The cart lurched to a halt in a sun-drenched amphitheater. A figure in a toga, with a face covered in what looked like solidified polenta, was being carried aloft by cheering crowds. He held a golden dish aloft, from which he launched a surprisingly accurate projectile of whipped honey and figs.

"Bromius," Chocko explained, "was a master of the crema bellica. His pies were legendary, though a bit... sticky. Used to settle disputes in the Senate. Nasty business, politics."

"I've tasted my aunt's Jell-O," Mabel muttered. "This isn't impressing me."
The Chrono-Cart lurched again. "Next up," Chocko yelled over the temporal wind, which briefly carried the dulcet tones of a Bloomberg Radio ad for a luxury condo development on the Upper West Side, "...starting at only seven million dollars..." "the Renaissance! Italy! Land of art, love, and... torta in faccia!" They arrived in a bustling Venetian square. A masked figure in a harlequin costume, his face a canvas of vibrant colors, was engaged in a duel with another masked man. Their weapons? Elaborate, multi-layered cream cakes.

"That's Arlecchino," Chocko informed Mabel, "and his rival, Pantalone. They're having a torta battalia. Arlecchino's the innovator, used a spring-loaded launcher hidden in his sleeve. Pantalone, classicist, prefers the direct approach. Both used to work with a zanni named Slipello, who was a real mattacchione."

"I've seen kindergartners with more restraint," Mabel said, watching a cake explode against a marble statue. "And better aim."

The journey continued, a whirlwind of cream-pie-related historical events, each punctuated by fleeting snippets of Bloomberg Radio discussing the latest Federal Reserve interest rate hike:

18th-Century France: They witnessed Marie Antoinette, not saying "Let them eat cake," but rather, "Let them be pied with cake!" during a particularly rowdy courtly gathering. Chocko noted her preferred weapon: a delicate, rosewater-infused confection.

"Rosewater?" Mabel sniffed, taking a drag from her cigarette, the smoke curling around the "No Smoking" sticker. "More like rose-tempered. I'd return the bouquet."

The Vaudeville Era: They found themselves backstage at Shea's Buffalo Theatre, a raucous theater, where a gaggle of clowns with names like "Whiskers," "Buttons," and "Professor Flummox" were engaged in a cream pie fight of epic proportions. Chocko pointed out a young Charlie Chaplin, perfecting his signature waddle and his devastating pie-throwing technique.

"Chaplin," Chocko sighed, "a true zany for the ages. Knew how to milk a laugh, that one."

"He walks like a man who sat on a cactus," Mabel observed, flicking ash onto the floor of the Chrono-Cart. "But I'll give him points for consistency."

Golden Age of Hollywood: They watched the Three Stooges, their faces plastered with white goo, their slapstick routines reaching new heights of pie-based mayhem on a flickering black and white set.

"Moe," Chocko reminisced, "a card, but a heart of gold... mostly. And Larry? A genius of the delayed reaction."

"Chaos is just entropy in a bow tie," Mabel said, dodging a stray spectral pie. "I'm not impressed by formal wear."

Finally, the Chrono-Cart sputtered, deposited them back at the Buffalo Paper & Pulp Mill, right where the wall had been. Mabel, covered in a fine mist of temporal custard, stared at Chocko, her expression a mixture of awe and disbelief. Clocko, a small, clockwork owl perched on the dashboard of the cart, hooted softly and gestured with a tiny wing towards a series of stone buttons near what looked like a faded image of a dashed line on the side of the goat cart.

"Push those buttons, Mabel, near the dash-like mark," Chocko instructed. "It helps Gnorman dial us back properly. Sometimes... well, sometimes we get Bloomberg Radio." Mabel, still slightly dazed, reached out and fumbled with the buttons. Instead of the gentle whir of temporal displacement, the cart filled with the crisp voice of a Bloomberg

Radio anchor: "...and that concludes our interview with the CEO of Chateau Pillow. We now turn to market analysis with Brenda..."

"Oops," Mabel said.

The Bloomberg Radio broadcast continued, now featuring an ad for a local Buffalo law firm: "Injured in an accident? Call Cellino and Barnes... eight hundred, eight, eight, eight..."

Clocko hooted again, more insistently, tapping another button with its beak. The Bloomberg Radio faded slightly, replaced by Chocko's voice: "Try the other one, my dear, the one that feels like a slightly squashed fig."

Mabel pressed another button. The Bloomberg Radio intensified, now a financial advisor earnestly explaining the benefits of diversifying one's portfolio with municipal bonds.

"This is worse than waiting for a table at Ted's Hot Dogs on a Friday night," Mabel grumbled.

Finally, after a few more tries guided by Clocko's frantic hooting and Chocko's cryptic instructions – "The one that feels like disappointment!" – the Chrono-Cart shuddered, and the Bloomberg Radio dissolved.

"So," she said, wiping a glob of something vaguely lavender-scented off her cheek, "who was the best?"

Chocko stroked his chin, his ancient eyes twinkling. "Ah, Mabel, that's like asking which star shines brightest over Canalside. Each had their own style, their own shtick. Bromius had the power, Arlecchino the artistry, the Stooges... the sheer, unadulterated chaos. But if I had to choose one..." He paused for dramatic effect. "...it's impossible! The cream pie is a democratic weapon, a culinary equalizer! Its true beauty lies in its versatility, its ability to bring laughter (and a bit of humiliation) to any situation, any era!"

He bowed deeply, his oversized shoes squeaking on the linoleum floor. "But fear not, Mabel! The show's not over yet! For the grand finale..." Chocko produced a cream pie from seemingly nowhere, a perfect, fluffy specimen. He looked at Mabel, a mischievous glint in his eye. "For the anniversary girl?"

"I'm still waiting for the buffet," Mabel said, staring at the pie. "This better not be the main course."

Before she could answer, Chocko launched the pie. It hit her square in the face. The mill erupted in laughter. Even Mabel cracked a smile, a rare sight indeed.

"I've been baptized in sillier things," she said, wiping custard from her eyebrow. "But I'll give you points for punctuation."

As Chocko took his bows, disappearing back through the shimmering wall with Gnorman and the Chrono-Cart, Mabel knew one thing for sure: this was an anniversary party that would be talked about for another eighty years, right alongside the time the ice machine overflowed and flooded the break room.

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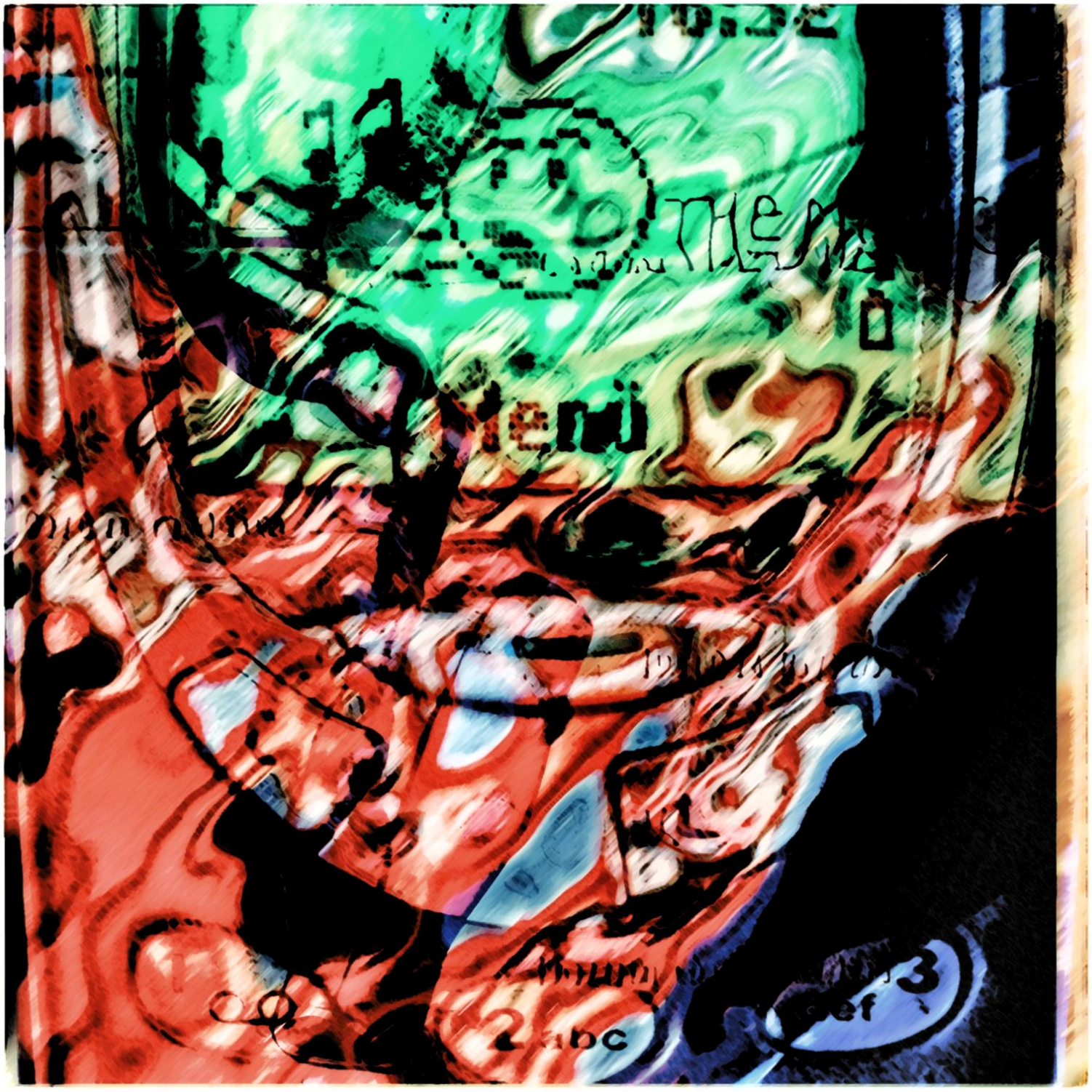

Receiver! Gallbladder! Bile!

By Liisi Anniina Kirsti Sara Aaltonen

The peeling linoleum of the Hämeentie apartment block hallway, a sickly beige crisscrossed with hairline cracks that resembled a roadmap of forgotten sorrows, felt clammy and cold beneath Kaija's worn, floral-patterned slippers, the fabric frayed at the edges like a moth-eaten memory. Inside the cramped studio, the white walls, painted so many times they seemed to breathe in layers, seemed to press in on her, amplifying the frantic energy that buzzed beneath her skin like a trapped fly desperately seeking an invisible window. The silence was a fragile membrane, constantly being punctured by a faint, insistent scratch-scratch-scratch emanating from behind the peeling floral wallpaper, its pattern a faded riot of improbable roses and sickly sweet pea vines. Kaija's gaze, sharp and restless, flickered to the beige Nokia 3310 on the particleboard side table, its plastic yellowed with age and grime, a hulking dinosaur from a forgotten decade, its antenna bent at a precarious angle. It squatted there, inert, a silent judge of her unraveling. Scratch-scratch... a tiny, almost human cough.

The room offered no solace: a single mismatched chair, its faux leather cracked and revealing a stuffing of grey, lumpy foam, a floor lamp with a tarnished brass base and a shade casting a jaundiced light that seemed to solidify the dust motes dancing in the air, and a print hanging askew on a rusty nail – a kidney, rendered in unsettling detail, bloated and strangely luminous in shades of sickly green that verged on gangrenous and bruised purple like a fading contusion, adrift in a sea of pale blue that hinted at a toxic sky.

Thump-thump-THUMP. A rhythmic booming, deep and resonant, vibrated through the floorboards, shaking the loose change in the chipped ceramic ashtray on the table. Kaija's eyes, the whites now tinged with a faint yellow, began to prickle, a viscous, emerald-green liquid welling in the corners, thick and smelling faintly of stagnant water. The only sounds, besides the subterranean drumming and the skittering behind the walls that suggested a colony of suited rats holding a clandestine board meeting, was the insistent

stutter of a digital clock on the cheap plastic casing of the microwave, its display frozen at 11:47, a perpetual moment of stalled time. POP! Sizzle... crackle. A plume of acrid, burnt coffee smoke erupted from the corner, where the ancient, stainless-steel coffee percolator, a relic of a more optimistic era, lay in pieces, its glass carafe shattered, steam hissing from its ruptured base like the dying breath of a mechanical beast.

Munuainen, her left kidney, a phantom limb of the psyche, an unwelcome tenant that had burrowed deep into the spongy folds of her thoughts, now felt like a leaden weight dragging down her very soul. It spoke through the beige Nokia, a frayed tether to a world that felt increasingly distant and unreal, the dial pad sticky beneath imagined phantom fingers. The calls were erratic, sometimes days apart, yet each one resonated with a disquieting familiarity, a half-remembered lullaby sung in a language of wet clicks and static hiss. Scratch-scratch-scratch... a muffled argument in rapid, high-pitched squeaks, punctuated by the rustling of what sounded like tiny paper. Munuainen was more than just an organ; it was a confidante in the dead of night, its pronouncements delivered with the gravitas of a malfunctioning oracle, a cryptic advisor whose advice was always one step sideways from sanity, and a persistent goad, a constant internal nagging that fueled her anxiety, all wrapped in the unsettling shimmer of verdigris, the color of old pennies and slow decay. Bile, thick and bitter enough to curdle milk, now streamed down Kaija's cheeks, leaving burning trails that felt strangely cold against her fevered skin.

The Nokia 3310, a monument to disconnection in an increasingly hyper-connected world, stood as a stark reminder of the fractured relationships that littered Kaija's past like broken porcelain dolls. Its faded plastic, sticky with years of neglect and the ghostly residue of countless unanswered calls, offered a grim contrast to the lurid landscapes of her inner world, where Munuainen would weave elaborate and unsettling tales of the urinary tract, its language a bizarre tapestry of precise anatomical terms delivered with the dramatic flair of a Shakespearean actor and fragmented philosophical musings that veered wildly between existential dread and the proper pH balance of urine. Thump-thump-CRASH. The rhythmic booming intensified, the walls seeming to vibrate in sympathy, followed by a wet, resonant thud that sounded suspiciously like a large, water-filled sack being dropped from a height. Kaija's vision swam, the room tilting precariously as the constant flow of emerald bile blurred the already distorted reality.

Her brow, etched with worry lines that seemed too deep for her thirty-seven years, throbbed with the dull, insistent ache of Lauri – a persistent sebaceous cyst that had bloomed, against all medical probability, into a throbbing, subcutaneous eye, complete with a rudimentary, milky iris and a disturbingly active pupil, a fleshy orb of self-recrimination that pulsed in time with her erratic heartbeat, a heart that felt perpetually heavy, like a waterlogged sponge or a stone dragged from the icy depths of the Baltic Sea. Scratch-scratch... a tiny, formal cough followed by frantic scribbling sounds, as if the suited rats were meticulously taking notes on her descent into madness.

This cramped studio apartment, with its perpetually damp air and the faint, lingering smell of mildew, was a self-imposed exile, a liminal space where the edges of reality bled into the absurd, where the laws of physics seemed to operate on a whim. The phone, this obsolete device, was her only tenuous link to the outside, yet she felt more profoundly alone than ever, marooned on an island of her own making, her thoughts a tangled knot of unspoken anxieties and the looming dread of an unwritten future, a future that felt as substantial as smoke. The smell of burnt coffee, acrid and clinging, mingled with the metallic tang of bile, creating a uniquely nauseating olfactory landscape.

Kaija's breath hitched, a ragged gasp that caught in her throat, as the Nokia 3310 finally shrieked, its antiquated ring – a tinny, insistent melody that sounded like a dying mosquito – slicing through the cacophony like a shard of shattered glass. Her hand, trembling slightly, the skin slick with drying bile, reached for the receiver, her eyes fixed on the unsettling green glow emanating from the kidney in the cheap, mass-produced print, its colors somehow seeming to deepen and pulsate. Thump-THUMP-THUMP. The rhythmic booming reached a fever pitch, the floorboards vibrating so intensely that the crooked kidney print rattled against the wall. The connection crackled, a sound like frying insects, Munuainen's voice a distant murmur, as if speaking through a mouthful of gravel and static, each syllable a struggle against the void. The emerald bile dripped from her chin onto the stained carpet.

"Kaija," it rasped, the sound like air escaping a punctured lung that had been filled with rusty nails. "I've been observing. Waiting." Scratch-scratch-SCREECH! A high-pitched squeal, like a tiny violin string being violently severed, punctuated the rasping voice,

followed by a frantic flurry of scratching that sounded like dozens of tiny claws scrabbling for purchase.

Kaija leaned closer, her pulse quickening, a frantic flutter against her ribs. Lauri, the miniature eye on her forehead, throbbed in response, a dull, insistent pressure that felt like a tiny fist clenching behind her skin. The booming abruptly subsided, replaced by a series of dull, rhythmic thuds, like something heavy being repeatedly dropped onto a padded surface.

“The fabric is fraying,” Munuainen continued, its tone shifting to something akin to urgency, a desperate plea whispered through a hurricane of static. “You are the one who sees the loose threads, the one who understands the hidden geometry of this... this unraveling.” The bile continued its relentless flow, staining the collar of her threadbare dressing gown a sickly green.

The words echoed in the small, suffocating room, a fragmented prophecy delivered by a malfunctioning oracle from the depths of her own failing anatomy. Thump... thump... a mournful, low groan, like a vast, wounded beast sighing in its sleep.

“Find the ochre,” it urged, the voice now a wet whisper, like secrets being exhaled into a damp cloth. “Find the color of earth and decay, the hue of rust and dried blood. Only then will the circle close, the puzzle complete.”

The line went dead, a sudden, absolute silence descending upon the room, broken only by the faint, persistent scratching behind the wallpaper and the distant, rhythmic thudding that had now resumed its mournful cadence. The receiver felt heavy in her hand, slick with drying bile, the weight of Munuainen’s words settling like a physical burden, a stone in her gut. She touched Lauri, the miniature eye on her forehead, its milky iris now fixed and unseeing, a constant source of discomfort and a strange, unsettling awareness, a silent witness to her descent. The smell of burnt coffee, though fainter, still clung to the air, a phantom scent clinging to the bitterness of the bile.

A sudden, inexplicable resolve hardened her features, a flicker of determination in her bile-streaked eyes. She stood, the worn linoleum scraping beneath her bare feet, the sound echoing in the sudden quiet. Lauri, the unblinking eye, pulsed with a renewed intensity, but she ignored it, her focus narrowed. There was a strange pilgrimage to undertake, a descent into the illogical, a journey guided by the cryptic pronouncements of a talking kidney. She had to find the ochre that Munuainen spoke of, the color that would somehow mend the fractured landscape of her inner world, to silence the scratching rats and the mournful drumming ox. Scratch... scratch... a tiny, triumphant squeak, followed by the distinct sound of miniature applause. The burnt coffee smell seemed to cling to the drying bile on her face, a perverse form of war paint.

The Helsinki outside her window, visible through the grimy glass, was a monochrome study in grays and muted browns, the colors of concrete and rain-soaked asphalt, a landscape as bleak and unforgiving as her own inner world. But she felt a strange, unwavering certainty that somewhere within this urban sprawl, amidst the decaying facades and forgotten corners, lay the specific shade she sought, hidden beneath the veneer of the ordinary, a vibrant anomaly in a world leached of color. The rhythmic thudding from somewhere below had stopped again.

Kaija stepped out into the cold, damp air of the hallway, the bile now drying in sticky, emerald tracks on her cheeks, her eyes scanning the cityscape with a desperate intensity for the elusive hue. The buildings loomed, their concrete surfaces stained with years of grime and neglect, their reflections distorted and shimmering in the oily puddles that dotted the cracked pavements like dark, accusing eyes. She navigated streets that twisted like forgotten intestines, lined with boarded-up shops and graffiti-scarred walls, past faces that seemed as blank and unreadable as her own, each a fleeting ghost in her peripheral vision. Scratch-scratch... silence, then a sudden, loud CRASH from behind a nearby wall. Yet, she pressed on, driven by the unsettling whispers of Munuainen that resonated deep within her, a morbid compass guiding her through the labyrinth of the city.

In a forgotten courtyard, tucked behind a graffiti-scarred wall depicting a three-eyed rabbit smoking a pipe, she saw it – a patch of rust on a discarded metal drum, its surface

pitted and scarred by time and neglect. It was ochre, a deep, earthy brown that seemed to vibrate with a hidden energy, a stark contrast to the surrounding grays. As she drew closer, a flake of rust, fragile as dried blood, detached from the drum, falling onto the damp concrete at her feet. It felt strangely warm to the touch, pulsing with a faint, internal heat.

Her breath caught in her throat, a small, involuntary gasp, as she bent down, her joints stiff and protesting, picking up the fragile fragment. She brought it to her forehead, the rough texture a stark contrast to the smooth skin, pressing it against Lauri, the unblinking eye. The miniature eyelid fluttered once, and then, with a soft, wet sound like a slug being squashed, it burst. A wave of ochre light, the color of dried earth and ancient secrets, washed over the courtyard, momentarily eclipsing the drab surroundings, and when it faded, Lauri was gone, leaving behind only a smooth, slightly indented patch of skin. The faint scent of rust mingled with the lingering bitterness of bile, a strange and unsettling perfume.

The Nokia 3310 shrieked again, its jarring ring a stark intrusion into the sudden, almost eerie silence. Munuainen's voice, now clearer, stronger, filled her ear, no longer a distant murmur but a resonant pronouncement.

"You have found it, Kaija. Now, return. The integration is near."

The courtyard seemed to dissolve around her, the rough brick walls softening and flowing into an indistinct haze, the graffiti of the smoking rabbit melting into the ochre light. The air thickened, taking on a viscous quality, as if she were submerged in a slowly churning liquid. The sickly green of the kidney print, now impossibly large and luminous, pulsed with a soft, internal light, a beckoning beacon in the dissolving reality, drawing her in like a moth to a sickly flame. The ochre dust on her fingers felt strangely alive, tingling against her skin.

Kaija took a hesitant step forward, a strange sense of inevitability washing over her, a surrender to the absurd logic of her own unraveling. The ochre dust on her fingers seemed to sink into her skin, a warm, earthy current flowing through her veins, bringing

with it a sense of unsettling familiarity, a primal recognition of something ancient and deeply buried. The burnt coffee smell had completely vanished, replaced by the faint, metallic tang of rust and the earthy scent of the ochre.

As she moved closer to the pulsating green light, the sounds of the city faded completely, replaced by a low, rhythmic thrumming that resonated deep within her bones. The kidney in the print expanded, becoming a swirling vortex of sickly greens and bruised purples, a fleshy maelstrom pulling her into its depths. The last traces of bile on her face evaporated, leaving her skin strangely smooth and cool.

In the dissolving reality of her inner world, a strange understanding bloomed, a silent recognition of the interconnectedness of her fractured self. She was not merely a woman in a drab apartment with a burst cyst and a talking kidney; she was a vessel, a conduit for the bizarre and the inexplicable, a nexus point where the boundaries between the physical and the psychological blurred and reformed in unsettling ways. And with Munuainen, her internal lodger, she would navigate the labyrinth of her own being, forever bound in a strange, symbiotic dance of decay and renewal, a grotesque ballet performed in the theater of her own mind. The thrumming intensified, a deep, resonant hum that filled the void, a prelude to an unknown transformation.

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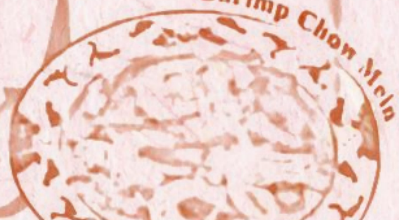

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